

Iraq announces two coronavirus deaths

March 4 2020

Iraqi health authorities announced on Wednesday the country's first two deaths from the new coronavirus, one in the capital Baghdad and the other in the autonomous Kurdish region.

A 70-year-old Muslim cleric died on Wednesday from the virus, the first death from the outbreak in a country where 31 people have been infected.

The Iraqi preacher had been quarantined in the northeastern city of Sulaimaniyah before his death, a spokesman for the Kurdish autonomous region's health authority said.

According to local sources, he had recently met with Iraqis returning from neighbouring Iran, which has recorded the third deadliest outbreak outside China, the epidemic's epicentre.

A second death from the new coronavirus was announced later in the day by Iraq's health ministry, which said in a statement that the deceased was in Baghdad and suffered from "immune deficiencies".

Across the world, 3,245 people have died from the virus, with China recording 2,981 deaths, Italy 107 and Iran 92.

Iraq is one of Iran's largest export markets and a popular destination for Iranian pilgrims visiting the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.

Many Iraqis also cross the frontier for business, tourism, medical

treatment and religious studies.

Iraqi authorities have closed land borders with Iran and banned the entry of foreign nationals travelling from there and other badly affected countries.

Schools, universities, cinemas, cafes and other public places in Iraq have been ordered shut until March 7 to further contain the outbreak.

Responding to Wednesday's death in the Kurdish region, Sulaimaniyah Governor Haval Abu Bakr told reporters that all rallies in the province will be banned and that all football matches will now be held behind closed doors.

Local religious authorities for their part announced a ban on mass prayers, including on Fridays, until further notice.

The outbreak has fuelled public panic among Iraqis who say the war-ravaged country's healthcare system cannot handle the epidemic.

Many hospitals in Iraq are poorly equipped or in disrepair after successive waves of conflict.

According to the World Health Organization, there are fewer than 10 doctors for every 10,000 people.

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